

President gets a new political council

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One of the events that took place on December 25, 2000 could serve as yet another proof of the Ecclesiastical point that there is nothing new under the Sun, and also showed once again that everything that could be regarded as new was nothing but something old but well-forgotten. On the other hand, Heraclitus' claim about impossibility to step into the same river twice was seriously challenged.

On December 25, 2000, the head of this state decreed the establishment of the Political Council under the President of Ukraine. Officially, the rationale for the establishment of the new body was «to ensure fuller taking into account of positions of political forces in the process of developing state policies, proposals and recommendations of parties for further improvement of the political system of the society, establishment of constructive cooperation between bodies of state power and associations of citizens in order to ensure stability in the state.» The new entity was established in accordance with paragraph 28 of Article 106 of the Constitution stipulating that the President of Ukraine «establishes consultative, advisory and other auxiliary bodies and services, within the limits of funds earmarked in the State budget of Ukraine, for performance of his authority.» Hence, the Political Council is entitled to budget funding, but the amount of funds necessary for its operation is still unknown. The 2001 State budget, approved on December 7, 2000, contained no appropriations for the Political Council.

According to the President's decree, the Political Council will function as a consultative and advisory body, led by the President himself and gathered of representatives of political parties. The selection of parties to join the Political Council will be performed by the Council's Secretary, Valery Pustovoitenko, leader of the People's Democratic Party of Ukraine (PDP), former Prime Minister of Ukraine. At some point Valery Pustovoitenko managed to «survive» as the Prime Minister for the longest term in Ukraine's history since independence: he chaired the «executive power vertical» from mid-July 1997 to December 1999.

Under the decree, the Secretary has two weeks to produce a «Regulation on the Political Council under the President of Ukraine» and propose candidates to join the new entity. All organizational and logistical provisions for the operation of the Political Council are to be made by the Presidential Administration. The latter, and particularly the presidential chief of staff Volodymyr Lytvyn are likely to get the extra workload in addition to having to provide for its other recently created body, the «Public Council of Home Policy Experts», established by the President's decree on November 4, 2000 and chaired by Volodymyr Lytvyn.

Commenting on his appointment, the new Political Council's Secretary Valery Pustovoitenko stated solemnly that his task was «to assist the President to consolidate our society in the political aspect» (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, January 2, 2001). Logically, Pustovoitenko claimed that the purpose of the Political Council was «to unite political forces in the parliament, parties to work for the good of Ukraine» (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, January 2, 2001). Apparently, the new entity and Valery Pustovoitenko personally will have a lot of work to do: currently there are as many as 108 registered political parties in Ukraine, and the number is likely to grow as the new general election campaign will be taking pace. However, with the Moroz tape scandal, the political crisis and the likely break-up of the parliamentary majority the task of consolidating political forces in the parliament may prove to be a difficult one. At least, it is unclear at the moment which levers of influence on political parties and factions in the parliament will be at the new Political Council's disposal.

While it is unclear who exactly the members of the new entity will be, the PDP leader Valery Pustovoitenko who has been outside the top-ranking decision-making circle after the parliament refused to support his nomination for the position of the Prime Minister in December 1999, argues that the new entity may consist of representatives of «political parties that took part in the pre-election block «Our Choice is Leonid Kuchma» and collective members of the All-Ukrainian Association of Democratic Forces Zlakhoda» (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, January 2, 2001). Probably, the past experience and connections will determine the scope of activity and steps of the Political Council.

At least some initial observations can be made based on the above comments and claims. First, the establishment of the Political Council with Pustovoitenko as its Secretary and the driving force may be seen as a come-back of the Zlahoda political project to the scene, and the beginning of Pustovoitenko's own return to the «big politics», in which his vast experience of «organizing and leading» something may soon be needed. The appointment may be regarded as an additional chance for Pustovoitenko's PDP to get some political attention and media coverage. However, the revival of the former «party of power», seeking to regain its past importance and influence, may receive a rather cold shoulder from the current claimants of the title of «parties of power», primarily Oleksandr Volkov's Democratic Union, the Trudova Ukraina of Pinchuk-Derkach, and now, to an extent, Serhiy Tyhypko, and the Medvedchuk-Surkis SDPU(o). In addition to creating stronger competition between the political parties and giving more dynamism to the inter-party relations, the reinvigoration of the PDP may deal yet another blow to the ailing parliamentary majority to which all of the above parties belong.

Valery Pustovoitenko's major political project of the past, the Zlahoda association, was first announced on January 15, 1999, when the foundation meeting of the new association of «democratic forces» was held in the Ukrainskiy Dim in Kyiv. The meeting produced a 17-strong steering committee, expected to transform the initiative into a real political force. Speaking at the foundation meeting, then Prime Minister Valery Pustovoitenko stated symptomatically an unequivocally that «the initiative of the unifying process around the ideas linked to the country's future comes from the government that has already passed through the tournament of the first, the most complex stages of reforming, and which, as never before, requires broad public and political support.» In the bureaucratic understanding, public support needs to be initiated and organized. At that point a wave of meetings swept Ukraine, too similar to the former Comsomol meetings with their massive approach, far-reaching goals and demonstrative declarations of unity. The meetings were attended by almost 50 thousand «representatives of the public» throughout Ukraine. On March 19, 1999, the Zlahoda's Steering Committee initiated the Unification Forum of Democratic Forces, held in the Ukraina National Palace of Culture and attended by President Leonid Kuchma. The Forum was followed with the Foundation Assembly (Congress) of the All-Ukrainian Association of Democratic Forces Zlahoda, held in Kyiv on March 20, 1999. The congress was attended by 2,643 delegates from all regions of Ukraine: central executive officials, members of the Ukrainian parliament, representatives of political parties and government-related NGOs, approved religious activists, academics, artists... The congress adopted the association's Charter, elected the Association's Board and the audit commission, and proposed a draft Agenda for discussion. Leonid Kravchuk, Ivan Pliushch and Valery Pustovoitenko were elected as co-chairmen of the new association. On April 2, 1999, the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine registered a national NGO - the All-Ukrainian Association of Democratic Forces Zlahoda. The foundation conferences of local branches of the new organization took place in most of Ukraine's regions in March-June 1999. Representatives of the Zlahoda went on to organize something similar to Communist «subotniki», marched in the first ranks of the May Day columns and launched a number of other Soviet-style publicity actions... In addition to declarations about the need to unite forces, and the obvious Communist-Comsomol tune of the statements, the new entity was clearly targeted at future election campaigns, particularly at the presidential election campaign scheduled to take place later that year. At that time, Valery Pustovoitenko's and his Zlahoda's explicit support for the incumbent president looked rather effective and did produce some of the desired results. As the PDP chairman, Pustovoitenko publicly stated that «our election campaign staffs are being formed in every region where there is at least one grass-root organization of the PDP. A block of 23 political parties, to which the PDP also belongs, will work and, in fact, is already working for the support of the incumbent President» (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, August 20-26, 1999). No doubt, the Zlahoda was an integral part of the effort.

Meanwhile, the establishment of the Zlahoda in the spring of 1999 was also seen as construction of a political «emergency landing site» for some politicians who took part in the election process as the Zlahoda activists. The «emergency landing site», built just to be on the safe side, seems to be quite handy nowadays.

The Zlahoda was not only initiated, but also strictly coordinated and administrated from the top levels of the executive power vertical structure. The association developed in accordance with the command-administrative principles and, following the logic of the administrative process, withdraw from the political scene as soon as its key administrator left his top position in the Cabinet. Nothing had been heard about the Zlahoda for almost a year, as the unwanted formation was put to deep-freeze political sleep. However, following the same logic, the Zlahoda has every chance to be back on the stage with

Pustovoitenko's return to the top decision-making circle. The re-animation of the structure may be successfully carried out with the help of the notorious «administrative resource» that will give a boost to the general organizational framework and remainders of local organizations. While the come-back of the Zlahoda will take into account the changing current political reality, the simple though heavy-weight political technologies used for the initiation of the Zlahoda are likely to be used again to form the Political Council, reflecting the views, abilities and ambitions of its Secretary. Apparently, nobody intends to engage in inventing a «political bicycle». Given the experience of the Zlahoda-1, the Zlahoda-2 will evolve through meetings, conferences, congresses and agreements, attended and signed by a number of parties, bigger and smaller, and assorted nominally independent public associations. The consolidated political arrangement is likely to include the Moloda Ukraina, a party led by an experienced apparatchik Anatoly Holubchenko. At the end of December 2000 Pustovoitenko's PDP and Holubchenko's Moloda Ukraina adopted a «Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation». The document provided for the parties' joint efforts that might «become the basis for consolidation of democratic state-building forces that will take political responsibility for the future of Ukraine» (Vlada i Polityka, December 22, 2000). On December 23, 2000, a couple of days before the President's decree on the establishment of the Political Council, it was announced that the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (PIEU), led by former first vice prime minister Anatoly Kinakh and Valery Pustovoitenko's PDP had agreed to form a common political block. As some of the media wrote then, «the issue of formation of a PDP-PIEU block has been practically settled» (Ukraina Moloda, December 28, 2000). Speaking to the press after the meeting at which the agreement was reached, Valery Pustovoitenko announced that the PDP was «currently looking at the other participants of the future election race» (ibid.) According to the PDP leader, the party was negotiating with the Democratic Party of Ukraine, the People's Rukh of Ukraine (Udovenko), the Agrarian Party, the Trudova Ukraina and the Solidarity. At that time the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the Democratic party, the Inter-regional Reform Block, the Republican Christian Party and the Liberal Party (United) issued a joint statement calling «other political parties of democratic direction» to adopt an «effective model of cooperation between democratic forces» and «to get rid of lobby politics, within which group interests block public forms of the political process» (Vechirnyi Kyiv, December 28, 2000). Summing up the declarations, chairman of the Republican Christians Mykola Porovsky pathetically claimed on the pages of the PDP's official publication, the Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, that the agreement «signed by seven democratic parties about the strategic partnership and cooperation», «is becoming a reality». The next step towards the declared goal was specified as «giving the second chance to the All-Ukrainian Association of Democratic Forces Zlahoda». The task is supposed to be performed by means of holding the second national forum of the «democratic forces», Porovsky claimed (Ukraina i Svit Siohodni, January 2, 2001). It was also announced that the Vpered Ukraino! Party and the PDP's loyal partner Moloda Ukraina intend to join forces at the end of January - at least the unification process is expected to involve a joint meeting of the parties' leaderships. The parties are supposed to review a new joint agenda that will be proposed for adoption shortly.

While the process is obviously taking pace, not every political party seems to be welcome to join. Like the Zlahoda-1, the Zlahoda-2 is likely to experience the boycott and criticism of some of the left-wingers. According to the Ukrainian left-wing parties, the establishment of the presidential Political Council has its own political implications and objectives. According to Socialist party leader Oleksandr Moroz, the President's step represented «an effort to somewhat weaken the structures of the Democratic Union and the SDPU(o)» (Ukraina Moloda, January 3, 2001). He thinks that the decision «was aimed at not allowing those influential political parties to act as a serious force, independently or in [certain] context, that would have immediate control over the administrative resource» (Ukraina Moloda, January 3, 2001).

However, there is some obvious difference between the Zlahoda-1 and the new Political Council: the new entity may be quite well received by the Communists! A suggestion to that can be seen in the recent statement made by the Secretary of the Communist party's Central Committee Adam Martyniuk: Communists may consider cooperation with the new Political Council provided «that body proves to be a serious one and have certain voice, even though it does not decide anything but is a recommendation» (Ukraina Moloda, January 3, 2001). However, according to Martyniuk, such cooperation will be impossible if the Political Council merely tries to «switch the lines». While Martyniuk hopes that «the structure will unite leaders of all political parties, not just the propresidential ones» and that otherwise it will not be needed (Ukraina Moloda, January 3, 2001), his statements may be regarded as politically correct hints that the Communist party will choose to refrain from formally joining the new entity - and it is unlikely to be publicly asked to do so in the near future anyway.

Yet, a number of questions remain unanswered, primarily those of criteria to be used for the selection of representatives of the political parties to join the Political Council, and of legitimacy of that selective political entity operating under the control of the formally non-partisan president. The new-old story of a party-based administration-controlled top-down unification process, modeled after the Zláhoda project, continues. The establishment of the Political Council may serve as yet another evidence of the fact that the new election season is in process. The new political season is developing without improved election legislation, without the laws on political parties and on the opposition. Yet, some of Ukrainian political parties seem to have extensive experience of doing rather well and getting to the parliament without them.